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[Home](#) [About Us](#) [Areas of Expertise](#) [News](#) [Events](#) [Grants](#) [People](#) [Publications](#) [Contact Us](#)

[home](#) > [events](#) > [november 2009](#) > struggle for the soul of islam: inside indonesia

[September](#)

Film

[October](#)

[November](#)

[December](#)

[January](#)

[February](#)

[March](#)

[April](#)

[May](#)

[Events Archive](#)

Struggle for the Soul of Islam: Inside Indonesia

Tuesday, November 17, 2009

3:30 p.m.

Mershon Center for International Security Studies

1501 Neil Ave., Columbus, OH 43201



William Liddle

Professor of Political
Science

The Ohio State University

To sign up for this event, please [pre-register here](#).

The film runs for 58 minutes, with a discussion afterward moderated by [resident Mershon Indonesia expert Bill Liddle](#). Refreshments will be served. Sodas are available for \$1.25 from a vending machine at the Mershon Center.



Saiful Mujani

Mershon Visiting Scholar
The Ohio State University

In the Muslim world, Indonesia is unique. The majority practice their religion with a devotion deeply felt.

But compared to the stereotypes carried in the minds of most Westerners, Islam in Indonesia is very different.

- Muslim shamans pray five times a day, and then commune with mystical spirits while performing rites on other Muslims to cast or remove spells.
- Provincial kings and sultans, also Muslim, place offerings to the Four Guardians of the Earth on their palace grounds, and preside over ancient rituals, like the elaborate annual pageant of sacred objects in the city of Solo, where albino water buffalos, believed to possess supernatural powers, lead the procession.
- Muslim cross-dressers compete to be crowned Miss Indonesian Transvestite of the year, and also pray in the women's section of the mosque while wearing the traditional headscarf.

These practices would be considered blasphemy by many Middle Eastern Muslims. Islam in Indonesia has a centuries old tradition of being a tolerant, compassionate, and inclusive religion, where the

difference between what is Islam and what is Arab is keenly felt.

Despite this history of pluralism and moderation, however, in recent years Indonesia has become both a target and breeding ground for Islamic militants. The bombing of two night clubs in Bali in October 2002 was a stunning wake-up call that Al Qaeda-style terrorism had spread to Southeast Asia. It was second only to 9/11 as the most deadly terrorist attack in modern history.

Paradoxically, the coming of democracy to Indonesia in 1998, with the collapse of the corrupt and oppressive military dictatorship of General Suharto, was a factor in the rise of Islamist violence and terrorism. The new democratic freedoms allowed for Muslim militants who had fled the country to avoid prosecution (like the notorious Abu Bakar Bashir) to return and rekindle their movement. As Ulil Abshar-Abdalla, an Indonesian Islamic scholar and leader of the Liberal Islam Network says, "This freedom is not [only] for the good guys, but also for the bad guys."

This conflict between Indonesia's long tradition of tolerance, and the dramatic rise of fundamentalist forces, makes Indonesia a unique battleground in the war of ideas over how Islam should be understood - the frontline in what is becoming the most critical conflict of our age.

Struggle for the Soul of Islam: Inside Indonesia is part of PBS' groundbreaking "America at a Crossroads" documentary series. Premiering in April 2007, this series is a major public television event that explores the challenges confronting the post-9/11 world – including the war on terrorism, the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, the experience of American troops serving abroad, the struggle for balance within the Muslim world, and global perspectives on America's role overseas.

For more information, see the "America at a Crossroads" website at http://www.pbs.org/weta/crossroads/about/show_indonesia.html, and an article by *Inside Indonesia*'s reporter/producer Calvin Sims in *The New York Times* at http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/15/weekinreview/15sims.html?_r=1&oref=slogin

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